

(One Body in Christ) 3. Equal Members

by Zac Poonen

The Body of Christ is a diverse and equal community where every member has a unique contribution to make.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:15

Topics: "Unity in Diversity", "Equality in the Body of Christ"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of recognizing the equality and diversity of members within the Body of Christ, illustrating that just as no two snowflakes are alike, each believer has unique gifts and roles that contribute to the whole. He warns against feelings of inferiority or superiority, urging believers to appreciate their own contributions and those of others without comparison. Poonen highlights that true unity comes from cooperation rather than competition, and that every member, regardless of their perceived importance, is essential for the Body to function effectively. He encourages believers to embrace their individuality while working harmoniously together, reflecting the beauty of God's creation in the Church. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of fellowship, where love and mutual respect thrive amidst diversity.

Transcript

Scientists tell us that no two snowflakes anywhere in the world have the same patterns. Likewise, no two human beings anywhere in the world are completely alike.

God has created infinite variety in the universe. That is what makes creation so wonderful and beautiful. How unimaginably boring it would have been if there were no variety in the universe. Likewise, how uninteresting and prosaic life would have been if all human beings were exactly alike in temperament and personality.

There is variety in the Body of Christ just as there is in the human body. At the same time, there is an organic unity among the various members. All the members are equally important and necessary, though their functions in the Body may be completely different. No one member is more important than another. No one's ministry should exclude another's. When the body operates with each member fulfilling his own special function, then alone will there be a powerful corporate presentation of Christ to the world.

In Old Testament times, God often worked through individual prophets who were His representatives and mouthpieces. But not so now. Today, God works through the Body of Christ. God and Christ are to be represented to the world through the corporate working together of believers harmoniously in one Body.

And for this purpose, no one believer is more important than another. Each member's gifts are necessary for the upbuilding of the Body and for its ministry to the world.

A failure to recognize this as God's way can cause feelings of inferiority and superiority in the Church. Paul speaks of these in 1 Corinthians 12.

Feeling Inferior

Paul speaks first to those who, feeling inferior, assume that their gift is not as necessary to the building up of the Body as is another's.

"If the foot says, 'I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand', that does not make it any less a part of the body. And what would you think if you heard an ear say, 'I am not part of the body because I am only an ear, and not an eye'? Would that make it any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body were an eye - then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? But that isn't the way God has made us. He has made many parts for our bodies and has put each part just where He wants it. What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! So He has made many parts, but still there is only one body" (1 Corinthians 12:15-20 - TLB).

It is always harmful to compare ourselves with others in the Body of Christ - either favourably or unfavourably. Such comparisons can lead to pride - or discouragement and jealousy. When the foot begins to compare itself with the hand, it may say, "Well, I don't have as prominent a part in the body as the hand. I am usually covered over with socks and shoes, at the lowest end of the body, and hardly anyone ever notices my existence. The hand, however, is noticed by others every day. It is always busy doing something, whereas I am inactive most of the time." Once having compared itself thus, it is but a short step to discouragement and to the development of a spirit of complaining against God for having made it a foot instead of a hand. Such a spirit leads many a believer to bury his talent and do nothing what ever for the strengthening and good of the Body of Christ. The Church of Jesus Christ suffers today because of multitudes of believers who wish they had some spectacular gift; not having such a gift, they decide to do nothing.

Having a grudge against God for not giving you the gift that you see someone else has, is only a short step away from jealousy; and jealousy kills fellowship. As the Bible says, "Wherever there is a jealousy or selfish ambition, there will be disorder and every other kind of evil" (James 3:16 - TLB).

If only we could see the Body of Christ, there would be absolutely no room for jealousy. In the human body, the foot has no problem about just being itself. It never desires to be anything other than a foot and it never dreams of becoming a hand. It is quite content to be a foot. It knows that God has made no mistake in making it a foot. It rejoices in being a foot; it rejoices equally in seeing what the hand can accomplish, even though it realizes that it can never accomplish anything similar.

So will it be with all who have understood the meaning of the Body of Christ. When you are envious of another, when you cannot rejoice wholeheartedly at seeing another member being greatly used of God, it is obvious that you have not understood this truth at all. Any member who lives in close communion with the Head will rejoice and be glad when another member of the Body is honoured (1 Corinthians 12:26).

There is no room for competition either, between one member and another in the Body of Christ. Co-operation, not competition, is the law of the Body.

When you see another fulfilling some ministry ably, and you plan to show others that you can do just as good a job (if not better), then Self is obviously still in the centre of your life. If you were living in submission to the Head, you would never be competing with anyone in the Body. You would instead concentrate on doing your specific job - and doing it well.

If we believe in the perfect wisdom of God, we shall recognize that God knows best what gift to give each of us. There will then be no complaining, no discouragement and no jealous longing after another's gift.

There is no need for anyone in the Body of Christ to feel inferior. All members of the Body may not be equal in terms of ability or talent, but all are equal in terms of usefulness in God's work in their own appointed place.

We are called to be ourselves - radiating God's glory through the particular temperament, gift and talents that God has given us. There is much limitation in the Church today, because believers do not bring into it their own special contribution. Vainly trying to imitate somebody else, they quench their own special gift, and as a result contribute nothing to the ministry of the Body.

Feeling Superior

To those who feel superior, Paul writes:

"The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' And some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary.... So God has put the body together in such a way that extra honour and care are given to those parts that might otherwise seem less important.... Now here is what I am trying to say: All of you together are the one body of Christ and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it (1 Corinthians 12:21-27 - TLB)."

There are some conceited snobs in the Church who feel they are more important than their fellow-believers. They consider their ministry to be more necessary to the Body than that of others. Of course they never express their feelings lest they be considered proud, but their actions and attitudes give them away. Such spiritual pride not only ruins them spiritually, but also rings the death-knell of true fellowship.

The eye is a very important part of the human body and has a significant function to perform. But if (to continue the analogy) it despises the hand saying, "I don't need you", then it has misunderstood its function in the body altogether.

So with anyone who considers his ministry more important than another's. Our hearts are so deceptive that we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we are called to be spiritual leaders and prophets among God's people. Those who fall into this trap then covet to be elders in churches and leaders in Christian organizations. They feel superior to others and are like a cancer in the Body of Christ.

No one is indispensable in God's work. When Elijah complained to God that he was the only one prophet standing true to God in the land of Israel, the Lord told him to go and anoint Elisha to replace him as prophet (1 Kings 19:14-16). Perhaps this was to teach Elijah that God would never be without men whom He could use. Even the great Elijah was not irreplaceable.

No one is indispensable in Christ's Body.

On the other hand, no one is dispensable either. The Bible says that all the members are necessary.

But we have first to recognize that we are dispensable, before we can become truly indispensable. We are most needed in the Body of Christ when we have realised our nothingness. Whenever someone feels that God's work in a certain place will not carry on without him, the truth usually is that the work would be far better off without him!

God's work is dependent on the corporate ministry of the Body of Christ - not on any one individual. In fact, the individual who tries to do everything himself is a positive hindrance to the work of God - for he leaves no room for others to function.

The eye is an important organ, but if the whole body were just one big eye such a body would be quite useless. Thus, when a church or Christian organization centres around the ministry of one man (however gifted he may be), it ceases to be an expression of the Body of Christ. Such a group actually becomes a hindrance to the work of God. However impressive the statistics may be, churches that centre around one gifted leader or pastor, do not fulfil their God-ordained function. True Christian fellowship is impossible in such a situation.

When one cell in the body grows into a size far beyond what God intended for it, it can only do so by crushing the life out of other cells in the process. This is cancer and, untreated it always kills the body.

This, alas, is the situation in many Christian organizations and churches. The believers therein are not able to grow spiritually because of the overpowering personality of one man in their midst. They are like small mushrooms growing under the shade of a mighty oak tree, that seldom see the sunlight themselves.

Let those who have an outstanding spiritual gift take note: You are more likely to hinder the growth of other believers than those with mediocre gifts. You are more likely to kill true fellowship than other less-talented brethren. Besides, you are in danger of making members of Christ's Body more dependent on yourself than on Christ the Head.

If we do not allow others to fulfil their ministry, we violate one of the fundamental laws of the Body. The Bible exhorts us - everyone of us - to regard others as more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). We may not be able, in all honesty, to consider everyone as more spiritual than ourselves, and the Bible does not urge false humility. What we are asked to do is to consider others as more important. Surely we can all do this - if we see our place and the place of others in the same body.

This does not mean that all the gifts of the Spirit are of equal value to the upbuilding of the Body. The Bible itself tells us that some gifts are of greater value than others (1 Corinthians 14) and we are told to "earnestly desire the greater gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:31). All believers have a definite contribution to make to the ministry of the Body, but those who have been given a more useful gift by God (in His sovereignty) will naturally be able to make a more significant contribution. The fact that some have a more outstanding gift is not inconsistent with the fact of the equality of all believers - for equality does not mean uniformity.

We Need Each Other

One of the wonderful things about our Lord, when He walked on earth, was that even though He was perfect and superior to everyone else, He moved among men as their equal. This is how we are called to live too. Jesus lived as a man needing the fellowship of other men. He turned to Peter, James and John in the garden of Gethsemane and said, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and

keep watch with Me" (Matthew 26:38). He, the Son of God, needed the prayer-fellowship of His imperfect disciples.

Yet how many of us are self-sufficient! We ignore weaker members of the Body thinking that we do not need them. We only betray our spiritual poverty and blindness by such an attitude. For remember, the Bible says,

Some of the parts (of the body) that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary (1 Corinthians 12:22 - TLB).

The internal organs of our physical body, like the heart and the liver, are never seen by anyone; yet they have vital functions to perform. So too in the Body of Christ. Some who do not have any public ministry, and who are unknown, are really most necessary.

The Bible says that even the Head (Christ) does not say to the feet (the least and lowest members in the body), "I don't need you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). How much less can we do without even the weakest and least-gifted of our fellow-believers. They have something to minister to us of Christ. So we should listen to them. If we ignore or despise them, we shall in that measure, deprive ourselves of the fullness of Christ.

Fellowship is always a two-way matter. There is giving and receiving. Those of us who have ability in the ministry of the Word often feel that others should always listen to us, because we feel we have something to give them. Even in conversation, we tend to dominate the scene, so that our brother hardly gets a chance to say a word. When he does have a chance to say something, we impatiently wait for him to finish, so that we can start preaching to him again. How self-important we are.

The Bible says, "Let everyone (preachers included) be quick to hear (and) slow to speak" (James 1:19). We need to educate ourselves in the art of listening to others. After all, God has given us two ears and only one mouth! And as someone has said, "God has given us ears that are always open and a mouth that shuts"! So, our prayer should be:

"Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff, And nudge me when I've said enough."

We need to listen to one another. We need each other's help. No member of the Body is self-sufficient.

No Room for Pride

When we see the Body of Christ, we cannot but recognize the equality of all believers - irrespective of race, education, intelligence or social background. All are equal and all are equally needed. None being more necessary than the other, and all having something to contribute, no one need feel inferior, no one can feel superior, and pride, comparison and jealousy are ruled out altogether.

There will be no room even for that inverted form of pride (which assumes the guise of humility) that some Christian workers have who glory in the fact that despite their being so spiritual (?) and so qualified, they are yet willing to work under less spiritual and less qualified brethren. How blind such people are to the Body!

How many a problem is solved when we have a spiritual revelation of the Body of Christ!

Unity in Variety

There is a God-ordained variety in the Body of Christ.

God uses our different temperaments and gifts to present a balanced picture of Christ to the world. By ourselves, each of us can at best present only a distorted and unbalanced image of Christ. Any single person's ministry, by itself, could produce unbalanced Christians. How thankful we have to be that there are others in the Body with differing emphases and temperaments. For example, if two brethren are ministering the Word to the same group of believers, and one's emphasis is, "Don't be too sure that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, for you may be deceiving yourself", and the other brother's emphasis is, "Be sure you are filled with the Holy Spirit", on the surface they may appear to be contradicting each other. But both emphases are needed - so their ministries could be mutually complementary.

In the Body of Christ, we can have Calvinists and Armenians working together, each bringing their distinctive emphases - for both viewpoints are in the Bible. As Charles Simeon once said, "The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes." So, we need people presenting both extremes.

Then again, there is room for 'outgoing' personalities as well as for shyer ones. Different temperaments can be mutually complementary. Some people may be over-cautious; never taking a step forward without much deliberation, weighing all the 'pros and cons', and wondering for a long time whether to move or not. Others are more carefree and tend to rush ahead enthusiastically, without thinking deeply about the consequences. Because both these (and other) kinds of personalities are found in the Body of Christ, there is a balance. If the Body consisted only of hesitant, deep-thinking personalities, progress might be too slow. Conversely, if the Body consisted only of impetuous enthusiasts, there might be too many unfinished projects.

Each temperament has its strengths and weaknesses. A variety of people with a variety of temperaments, working together as Christians, can present a more complete and more accurate picture of Christ to the world. So we should not be wasting our time trying to make everyone in the Body like ourselves. We should allow each one to be himself. What we do need to concentrate on, is how our strengths could support another's weaknesses. His strengths could in turn support our weaknesses.

By working together, Peter and John (men of different temperaments) brought more glory to God than they could ever have done independently. Paul and Timothy - strikingly different in their temperamental make-up - could yet labour together in the gospel and form a powerful team.

There are brilliant intellectuals as well as those with mediocre minds in the Church. Naturally, their presentations of the truth of God will vary. But neither category can despise or criticize the other, for both are equally needed in the Body, to present the gospel to a world consisting of intellectuals and non-intellectuals, philosophers and housewives, students and farmers, etc., God needed a genius and a scholar like Paul for His work as well as an unlearned fisherman like Peter. They had different styles of preaching the same good news, but each had a distinctive part to play, and neither could have done the work that God did through the other, just as ably.

Conversion does not alter a man's intellectual capacities. Neither does it compel him to change his social status. The gospel does not eradicate the heterogeneous nature of society here on this earth, although social distinctions do become irrelevant in Christ. God had need for a wealthy man like Philemon as well as for Onesimus who was a servant in Philemon's house. Their social levels and standards of living remained unchanged, but they each had a distinct contribution to make to the Body of Christ, that the

other could never make; and so they could labour together in the gospel.

God never intended the Body of Christ to be full of people who were exactly alike in every way - like motor cars turned out of a factory. No. The very ministry of the Body is dependent upon the variety of its members. There would have been stagnation and spiritual death if all were alike.

Even our disagreements with one another can be used of God to deepen our fellowship and lead us on to spiritual maturity. Proverbs 27:17 (TLB) says, "A friendly discussion is as stimulating as the sparks that fly when iron strikes iron," there are going to be sparks, but in this way both pieces of iron are sharpened.

Sometimes God places two people with different temperaments together in His work, and as they labour together, the sparks may fly between them, but this may be God's way of "sharpening" them. If one person is like iron and the other like clay, there will be no sparks and no sharpening either. Instead there will be the imprint of the iron on the clay - one strong-willed person's opinion forced on the weak-willed person. God's intention however is not that one person should press his views on another, but rather that both should learn from each other. We can disagree, but we can still be united, and still love one another - nay, we can love one another more deeply now than before.

I believe God permits differences of opinion (on non-fundamental matters) between different members of the Church so that there is greater opportunity for the exercise of Christian love. Loving one another would have been an easy matter if we all saw eye-to-eye on every matter. But when we disagree, our love is tested. So we need to thank God for disagreements that do not divide or disunite us.

A Christian fellowship that boasts no differences of opinion is 'suspect'. The members of such a fellowship are either failing to think for themselves or being dominated by one strong-willed person.

True Christian fellowship is forged and sharpened on the anvil of healthy, loving disagreements.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/zac-poonen/one-body-in-christ-3-equal-members/>

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